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ABSTRACT

Recent legislation and education initiatives in the United States have emphasized the role of high-stakes testing in reform movements designed to increase accountability for schools and improve student achievement. This digest suggests that because English language learners (ELLs) represent an increasing percentage of students enrolled in U.S. public schools, this group of learners must be considered when such initiatives are implemented. Educators must make critical decisions concerning how to include ELLs in high-stakes tests in ways that are fair and that address their needs. Factors to consider include the selection of appropriate testing accommodations and the accurate interpretation of test results. Specific sections address the following: the role of high-stakes tests; why to include ELLs in high-stakes tests; potential problems of including ELLs in high-stakes tests; and accommodations for ELLs. A section on what educators can do offers the following suggestions: (1) ensure that the test reflects the curriculum; (2) select appropriate accommodations and modifications; (3) teach the discourse of tests and test-taking skills; and (4) use test data carefully. (Author/VWL)

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English Language Learners and High-Stakes Tests: An Overview of the Issues

BRONWYN COLTRANE, CENTER FOR APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Recent legislation and education initiatives in the United States have emphasized the role of high-stakes testing in reform movements designed to increase accountability for schools and improve student achievement. Because English language learners (ELLs) represent an increasing percentage of students enrolled in U.S. public schools (Kindler, 2002), this group of learners must be considered when such initiatives are implemented. Educators must make critical decisions concerning how to include ELLs in high-stakes tests in ways that are fair and that address their needs. Factors to consider include the selection of appropriate testing accommodations and the accurate interpretation of test results.

The Role of High-Stakes Tests

Loschert (2000) describes high-stakes tests as assessments in which "students, teachers, administrators, and entire school systems must account for student performance" (p. 1). Tests that are used to make high-stakes decisions are frequently standardized assessments, such as the Stanford 9 or the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, although some states have designed their own tests. Students' scores on these tests may be used to determine promotion to the next grade level, which curricular track students will follow in school, or whether or not they will graduate.

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), high-stakes tests are being used more widely than ever before. This legislation requires that all students in Grades 3-8 be tested every year in reading and math. If schools and districts are unable to demonstrate adequate yearly progress, which is typically measured as a percentage of students who pass standardized tests, corrective actions may be imposed. These may include school-wide restructuring or requiring schools to provide students the option of transferring to another school.

Both positive and negative effects for ELLs may result from this heightened emphasis on high-stakes testing. Because high-stakes tests are meant to raise standards for student learning, ELLs—along with all other students who are tested—may be challenged to meet higher levels of academic achievement than before. On the other hand, the vast majority of high-stakes tests are written and administered only in English, often leaving ELLs at a disadvantage and raising questions as to how the test results should be interpreted. With issues such as school funding, grade-level promotion, and graduation at stake, using standardized test scores as a basis for major decisions could potentially be detrimental to ELLs and to the schools that serve them.

Why Include ELLs in High-Stakes Tests?

Historically, ELLs have not been included in high-stakes standardized tests (Lara & August, 1996). This practice has resulted in a lack of accountability for the academic progress of ELLs, with ELLs not being held to the same high academic standards as their peers. Consequently, ELLs have not benefited from the educational reforms that followed the implementation of high-stakes assessments (August & Hakuta, 1997). While No Child Left Behind now mandates the inclusion of ELLs in high-stakes tests, in the past most states have typically exempted students who have been in the United States or in an ESL/bilingual program for less than 3 years or who have not attained a certain level of English proficiency (Holmes, Hedlund, & Nickerson, 2000). Where ELLs have not been included in high-stakes tests, their needs have often been overlooked in program design and instruction. Thus, they have not reaped the benefits of educational initiatives and reforms intended to raise academic standards and promote student learning.

Potential Problems of Including ELLs in High-Stakes Tests

As beneficial as it may be to include ELLs in high-stakes tests, some complications arise concerning the validity and reliability of such tests for this group of learners. Educators must consider what is actually being assessed by any given test: Is the test measuring ELLs' academic knowledge and skills, or is it primarily a test of their language skills? When ELLs take standardized tests, the results tend to reflect their English language proficiency and may not accurately assess their content knowledge or skills (Menken, 2000), therefore weakening the test's validity for them. If ELLs are not able to demonstrate their knowledge due to the linguistic difficulty of a test, the test results will not be a valid reflection of what the students know and can do.

In some cases, testing ELLs in their native language may be more appropriate than using tests that are solely in English. Many ELLs are enrolled in bilingual education classes and receive some of their content-area instruction in their native language. These learners may be able to demonstrate their subject-area knowledge more effectively in their native language. However, tests in languages other than English are rarely provided. In fact, testing accommodations that involve translation of a test into a student's native language are frequently prohibited by states (Rivera, Stansfield, Scialdone, & Sharkey, 2000).

Other potential problems stemming from the inclusion of ELLs in high-stakes tests concern the cultural familiarity and knowledge assumed in some test items. Test items may contain references to ideas or events that are unfamiliar to ELLs because they have not been exposed to similar concepts in their native culture and have not lived in the United States for a long period of time. For example, a writing prompt that asks students to produce a persuasive essay about whether or not the U.S. government should support new space expeditions by NASA may be quite difficult for ELLs, whose knowledge of the concepts and expectations assumed by this test item, such as familiarity with the U.S. space program and the costs involved, could be extremely limited. An ELL who might otherwise have been able to write a proficient persuasive essay would be at a distinct disadvantage due to the cultural bias inherent in the writing prompt.

Accommodations for ELLs

In order to address some of the complications that arise with the inclusion of ELLs in high-stakes tests, various types of accommodations may be allowed when the test is administered. These are the most common types of accommodations:

- *Timing/scheduling*: ELLs are given additional time to take the test or are given additional time for breaks during the test.
- *Setting*: The test is administered to ELLs in a small group or in an alternate location, such as an ESL teacher's classroom, to ensure that ELLs are in a familiar, comfortable environment when they take the test.

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- *Presentation*: The test administrator is allowed to repeat or explain test items and directions for ELLs, or the test may be translated into the students' native language and administered by an ESL/bilingual educator.
- *Response*: ELLs may respond to test items in their native language, or they may dictate their responses to a test administrator.

According to Rivera et al. (2000), the accommodations most frequently used for ELLs are timing/scheduling and setting. While allowing an ELL more time to complete a test or administering the test in a smaller group in familiar surroundings may be helpful in some contexts, such accommodations do not ensure that learners' linguistic needs are being accounted for. On the other hand, additional explanations of test items, translation, and alternate ways by which students are allowed to respond to items all directly address ELLs' language needs and may increase the chances that learners will be able to demonstrate their knowledge. Accommodations should be selected carefully in order to ensure that ELLs are given appropriate support, including linguistic support, on standardized tests—especially when those tests are used as a basis for high-stakes decisions.

What Educators Can Do

When decisions are made regarding ELLs and high-stakes tests, several factors must be considered.

Ensure that the test reflects the curriculum

Educators who are responsible for selecting the tests that will be used for high-stakes assessment must examine how closely a test reflects the curriculum and standards being used in their state or district. As Menken (2000) points out, "in order for assessments to be effective and useful for educators in instructional practice, they must be deeply entwined with the classroom teaching and learning driven by the standards" (p. 4). If tests are aligned with standards and curricula, students will have an increased chance of demonstrating what they know and are able to do. Teachers of ELLs need to be involved in the decision-making process regarding which tests will be used. For example, testing committees at the school, district, and state levels that are responsible for selecting appropriate tests should include teachers who work with ELLs to ensure that the tests selected for use are appropriate for these learners.

Select appropriate accommodations and modifications

Educators must consider which testing accommodations may be most appropriate for an individual student or group of students. For example, translation of a test into a student's native language may be helpful for ELLs with a high level of cognitive-academic proficiency in their native language, but not for students whose native language skills are weak. Depending on a learner's language proficiency level, it may be beneficial to allow accommodations that affect how the test is presented and how students may respond to it (e.g., repetition and explanation of test items, or allowing students to dictate responses to a test administrator), in addition to testing modifications related to timing/scheduling and setting. With appropriate accommodations, ELLs are more likely to be able to demonstrate their knowledge on the test.

Teach the discourse of tests and test-taking skills

It is also beneficial to raise ELLs' awareness of the typical discourse and formats of standardized tests. ELLs may not be familiar with the kind of language that is used in tests, including many predictable patterns and phrases. It may also be beneficial to teach test-taking skills (e.g., how to approach a multiple-choice question, how to locate the main idea in a reading passage) to help prepare ELLs for specific types of test items they may encounter. Armed with a variety of test-taking skills and strategies, ELLs may be empowered to demonstrate their knowledge on a test, rather than being intimidated by unfamiliar terms and formats.

Use test data carefully

Perhaps most importantly, educators must be cautious when interpreting the test results of ELLs. As with all learners, it is crucial to remember that one test cannot accurately reflect everything that a person knows and is able to do. This point is particularly important if the validity and reliability of the test are questionable for ELLs, or if the students were not given appropriate testing accommodations. In any case, important decisions about ELLs should not be based on a single test score. Low scores on a standardized test may mean nothing more than that a learner has not yet mastered enough English to demonstrate his or her content knowledge and skills on a test. Multiple assessments, including some performance-based or alternative assessments that mirror what students are learning in class, will paint a much more accurate picture of students' knowledge, skills, and progress than any single test score can indicate. Similarly, high-stakes decisions should not be made regarding a program, school, or district with high numbers of ELLs based solely on test data. Such data may merely indicate that a school or district has a high percentage of ELLs, and not be reflective of instructional quality or program effectiveness.

As states move toward widespread use of standardized tests to ensure high standards and accountability in education, many additional issues may arise with regard to how ELLs fit into this movement. It is important to include ELLs in high-stakes tests so that we may set high standards for every student and ensure that all learners' needs are considered in educational reform efforts. However, educators must also seek a balanced approach to interpreting and using test data so that careful, informed decisions are made, particularly when these decisions carry high stakes for ELLs and the schools that serve them.

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